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US reporters find rough going in USSR, despite Helsinki accords

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The State Department yesterday protested the detainment of Monitor correspondent Gary Thatcher, urging the Soviets to return confiscated materials.

State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb said a protest had been lodged with the "appropriate Soviet authorities in Moscow" and called the incident "contradictory to the Helsinki Final Act and contradictory to the recent Soviet reaffirmation of the act."

For American journalists in the Soviet Union, the Helsinki accords have provided little improvement in working conditions.

The accords — signed 10 years ago in the Finnish capital by the United States, the Soviet Union, and 33 other nations — are intended to increase international cooperation and human rights.

Under the Helsinki agreement, foreign journalists receive protection against arbitrary expulsion. The accords also call for expanding travel rights for journalists and for improved access to both official and unofficial sources.

Since the agreement took effect, US journalists have found it easier to travel in and out of the Soviet Union.

But Helsinki-watchers say the past 10 years have been punctuated by frequent incidents of harassment, which have hindered the ability of Western journalists to practice their profession.

In 1977, the Los Angeles Times correspondent in Moscow, Robert Toth, was questioned for 13 hours over five days for alleged "espionage" stemming from a series of articles on scientific research in the Soviet Union. Soviet officials charged Mr. Toth with "activities incompatible with the status of a foreign journalist" because he contacted key Soviet scientists, including Anatoly Shcharansky, a leading member of a group in Moscow that monitored Soviet compliance with the Helsinki accords. After three strong US protests, Toth was finally freed. After returning to the US, he was charged by the Soviets with spying.

Four months earlier, correspondent George Krinsky of the Associated Press was expelled on charges of gathering secrets for the Central Intelligence Agency. After protesting directly to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin, the US retaliated by expelling a Tass correspondent based in the US, charging violation of the Helsinki accords.

According to statistics compiled by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, known as the Helsinki Commission, at least six Western journalists have been expelled from the Soviet Union since the Helsinki accords took effect, while numerous others have been denied accreditation.

For the most part, the problem for journalists has not been so dramatic. In general, the pattern has been one of low-level harassment, including vandalism of cars, police tailing, confiscation of documents, and attacks on Western journalists in the Soviet press. Western journalists also complain about long bureaucratic delays in gaining travel rights and access to official Soviet sources.

In addition, Soviet authorities have retaliated against Soviet citizens who give information to Western journalists, an indirect but effective form of pressure. Mr. Shcharansky, for example, was arrested in 1977 and sentenced to three years in prison and 10 years in a hard-labor camp, in part because of his contacts with Toth.

Since the Helsinki agreement is not actually a treaty, it contains no sanctions or mechanisms for enforcement. Its principal value has been to keep the spotlight of international opinion trained on Soviet human rights practices.

"It has helped provide a standard against which a country like the Soviet Union can be measured," says Aryeh Neier of the Helsinki Watch Committee in New York. "In that sense, it's provided a vehicle for criticism," he says.

But Mr. Neier and others are quick to add that Helsinki has done little to modify Soviet behavior. After 10 years, they say there has been no real improvement in working conditions for foreign journalists.